

Measuring the Borrowability of Word Meanings from a Comparative Perspective: Results from a Loanword Typology Study

Category: Oral or poster

(499 words)

This paper presents some of the results from a large-scale international research project on lexical borrowing. The collaborative project involves several dozen scholars who work on languages representing the geographical, typological, and genealogical diversity of the world's languages. Each contributor was asked to compile an extensive lexical database based on a fixed list of over 1,400 meanings, and the individual databases were then integrated into one consolidated database.

Unlike word lists traditionally used for lexical comparison and analysis, our database allows for an unlimited number of words to be linked to a single meaning and conversely for an unlimited number of meanings to be linked to one word. Moreover, in addition to the word form itself, a wealth of other information is provided for each lexical item, such as morphological structure, age, and loanword status (ranging from 'no evidence for borrowing' to 'clearly borrowed').

One of the major results of the project is a list of all the meanings in the database ranked by how often the counterparts of each meaning are represented by loanwords. For ease of presentation this short conference paper, we will focus mainly on the first 20 least borrowable items on the list.

The list includes seven verbal meanings compared to only four nominal meanings, confirming a commonly made yet hitherto unproven claim that nouns are more borrowable than verbs. The four least borrowable verbal meanings represent semantically broad, typically polysemous verbs: 'stand', 'make', 'go', 'carry'. The next three are basic bodily functions: 'eat', 'hear', 'suck'. The three least borrowable nominal meanings are body parts ('mouth', 'nose', 'udder'), followed by a plant part ('root'). There are no man-made objects on the short list, the least borrowable noun in this category being 'house' (number 58). All the other items in the top 100 are culture-free. The short list of least borrowable meanings also includes two adjectives ('sharp', 'thick') and seven grammatical or deictic meanings. The fact that more than a third of top 20 least borrowable meanings are grammatical/deictic (typically represented by function words in the individual languages), despite the very low proportion of such meanings in languages' vocabularies overall, confirms a long-held yet hitherto unproven claim that function words are more resistant to borrowing than content words. These seven items include the pronominal meanings 'I', 'you (singular)', and 'he/she/it', the demonstratives 'this' and 'that', plus 'in' and 'yesterday'.

The results of our study are thus not particularly surprising, but they provide a solid empirical basis for what has so far only been suspected. They also allow us to go significantly beyond intuitive definitions of hard-to-borrow meanings such as those underlying the Swadesh list. While the words corresponding to the 207 meanings on this list have a 15% chance of being loanwords in the languages of our sample, the 200 least borrowable meanings on our list have loanword counterparts in only 5% of the cases. Thus, historical linguists who are interested in the most stable meanings now have a serious alternative to the Swadesh list.